

Walking Mountains

“The green mountains are always walking” –*Daokai*

Dear Sangha and Friends,

We find ourselves in the midst of summer when vegetable and flower gardens alike flourish at the Center, as do the weeds. So, it’s not unusual to find members among the green, working away to keep things tidy and beautiful. But we do rest and enjoy each other’s company, especially at the Sangha picnic this month. The silliness of the croquet match is worth the price of admission, so don’t miss it.

Our yard sale in August is the most important fundraiser of the year for the Zen Center, and it’s a lot of work and loads of fun to pull it off. People come from near and far to this event. Some say they plan their vacation to include it! Please join us.

–*Joan White*



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Fear and Retreat by Emily Cross



VANISHING
DANA J. GRAEF

At the two-day retreat in March, I noticed that whether due to age, years of practice, or some other mysterious combination of life ingredients, at some point I became tired of being afraid of my Zen practice. Recently reflecting on the poem TELL ME “How do you learn / how not to be / afraid?” from the collection *Vanishing* by Dana Graef, I wondered when and how this happened. Maybe there’s a lifetime allocation of Zen practice fear which eventually runs out. For some reason I immediately thought of dokusan and briefly considered whether Zen teachers through the ages may have been onto something. Although not an answer, I think it’s fair to say this: learning how not to be afraid involves a fair amount of being afraid.

Perhaps an outsized amount of fear

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MISSION

The Vermont Zen Center’s mission is to create a peaceful and inviting environment to support those who seek wisdom, compassion, joy and equanimity within a Buddhist context. The two-fold practice of the Center is to overcome the causes of suffering through spiritual development and to alleviate the world’s suffering through outreach activities and the cultivation of a caring attitude to the earth.

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in Zen training arises from the belief that enlightenment may be won, like winning at cards or the lottery. We imagine that it's somehow the luck of the draw, the roll of the dice, and if only we play our cards right, we, too, could win at the game of enlightenment. Step right up! Fear arises as we imagine we might somehow lose our chance. Then, at some point it becomes clear that discovering our true self is not like winning at cards. There's no house dealer, no rules besides just sit, and it's no gamble. We will one day become Buddhas and bodhisattvas. That nobody can do it for us, and that we can definitely do it for ourselves, will always, always be true. This is the solid ground beneath our feet.

In retreat there are endless opportunities to begin delving into what makes us tick in the face of fears large and small. For instance, at times I find myself becoming irritated thinking everyone seems to be hogging the bathroom during kinhin. What am I supposed to do? One day, a couple of decades into my practice it occurs to me: is this a fight-or-flight existential threat or an interesting inconvenience? Eventually I've come to love these moments in a retreat. On some level I finally realized that if I'm unable to at least begin to understand, accept, and find a way to work around them with equanimity, the possibility of skillfully navigating more complex life challenges in the dusty world life out-

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side of the Zen Center is unlikely. As with anything, the first step to changing our life is really wanting to change it. Where there's a will, there's a way.

Or, how about the mistaken idea that others know more than we do about Zen, and that we'll never be able to catch up? Just look at how confident everyone seems moving through the zendo, how everybody seems to know all the chants by heart. What we may not see is that all our Dharma brothers and sisters care about is helping us on our journey to the extent they are able. Not visible to the eye is how they, too, have plenty of moments of self-doubt and uncertainty. Could it be possible that someone watching us from the corner of their eye is 100% certain we know more than they do?

In the silence of a retreat, we can more easily discern the root causes of our own suffering: greed, anger, and ignorance. Understanding these causes, we hold the keys to unlocking the myriad prisons of our own fear; keys like great faith, great doubt, and great determination. Life in retreat is simple yet all the necessary ingredients of life are

there: our bodies, our one mind, our Buddha nature. Worlds of possibilities telescope out exponentially and a multiplicity of perspectives become unavoidable. We return to our practice time and again as surely as waves lapping up against the shore. Whether a two-day retreat or a three-month training period, the causes and conditions for continuous practice are stacked in favor of the ego-I simply getting tired and letting go.

After retreat, off the mat, we may notice our other pursuits have become quietly infused with our efforts. Whether writing music, learning a new language, running a weed trimmer, or anything else, if we keep on keeping on, the ego-I eventually lets go. We simply get tired of “doing it wrong.” This feels like a steadier kind of agency than the tyranny of the ego, one free from fear and self-recrimination.

Will Zen practice continue to be frustrating? Sure. Will it be, at times, boring, impenetrable, and endless? Absolutely. But it sure is a breath of fresh air when we find we're less afraid than we used to be. Perhaps becoming less afraid of our Zen practice is even a measure of progress, a milestone on the endless path of our own enlightenment. —

Total Eclipse by Jim Kahle



On the afternoon of April 8, Allyn and I were sitting in lawn chairs in a field in Essex, Vermont. We were waiting for the much-publicized total solar eclipse. Miracles do happen and the afternoon skies were predicted to offer good viewing along a narrow section of northern Vermont. Anticipation was high as we all gazed towards the heavens in our authorized made for safe-viewing sunglasses.

Our son John who lives in the Buffalo area wasn't taking any chances. He had driven to an area west of Cleveland with his two boys where the viewing was also supposed to be good. We were texting with him and getting a digital preview of what was heading our way. As the sky around us began to take on the

cast of sunset, John was quiet for quite awhile. Then we got a text from him saying, "That was the most amazing thing I've ever seen."

It wasn't long afterwards that we knew what he was talking about. The sky overhead went from twilight to midnight except for the fiery ball of blackness where the sun had just been. Planets appeared out of nowhere. Pink beads of light could be discerned along the edge of the corona.

And then there were the changes to the surroundings. The birds stopped singing and the peepers increased their volume. There was the yellow-pink shade of twilight, but it was not limited to a section of the horizon. It was a 360-degree kind of sunset. Our world, our universe had completely changed for a time and for those of

us lucky to experience it, life will never be exactly the same ever again.

The next couple of days, or more, there was a desire to try to make sense of it all. Like many people, I asked friends and acquaintances what their

If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown! But every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile.

experience with the eclipse was like. One person asked a very interesting question: "If there was a total eclipse once a year or once a month, would we ever get used to it?" I couldn't help but think of the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson:

Emerson was right. What could be more riveting than the grandeur of a clear, moonless, and starry night? But it happens often enough that many of us get used to it, numb actually. We sleepwalk our way through our precious lives in service to a self that actually doesn't exist.

It wasn't long after the conversation in question that I happened to be on my way to the Zen Center. I passed a marshy

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area along Route 7 and caught a glimpse of a red-winged blackbird, the first one of the season. The sun glistened off the patch of scarlet. The intensity of the redness felt like it singed a hole in the back of my retina. For a moment, it seemed like that blackbird was all there was.

Blackbird!

It may sound like a real stretch to compare the experience of witnessing a total eclipse with that of a glimpse of a red-winged blackbird, but the difference, it seems, is only a matter of degree. Wonder and awe, then gratitude and joy. It is gratifying to realize that these moments of feeling fully alive don't depend on something as momentous as an eclipse. They are available to us every single day. Or, as Joni Mitchell put it, "There's a sun show every second."

I was also grateful at that time to be heading to the Zen Center. You don't have to be a Zen Buddhist to experience the miraculous within the ordinary, but it helps. Our training is about many things, but it is most certainly about just paying attention. One, two three, we count our breath, each one whole and complete, just as it is. We gradually learn how to be right here, right now, or, as Basho puts it, we "learn to listen as things speak for themselves."

Practice helps us experience the uniqueness of every moment: a red-winged blackbird, the smell of lilacs, the sound of thunder. Over time we can learn to open up to this world of the here and now, this sense of intimacy. In going and returning we never leave home.

I am grateful to have been able to experience the April eclipse in all its glory, but I am most grateful to have the opportunity to practice at the Vermont Zen Center with all of you. It is this practice that we share that allows us to learn to become the person we were always meant to be. —



Gremlin *(Inspired by Hakuin Ekaku's art)*

Can you believe it?
I'm meditating!
I think? am I?

Can someone be sending
loving kindness?
to me? a gremlin!
I can't believe it!

Don't they know I'm trouble?
a mischievous trickster
out to do them harm?

It seems not, for here I sit,
awkward as—
as what?
a gremlin trying to meditate?

I have no idea where to put my eyes
my hands, my elbows.
Is this really how it's done?

What's that I smell?
That stick, burning
incense?

Why do I feel
like I'm glimpsing a new world?
Could I live in it?
Impossible!
Really, could I?

Nathalie Sorensen

Training Program Sunday, July 21 through Friday, July 26

For five days this summer, we will have a residential Training Program. Training Programs are a way to experience the discipline of Zen training through total immersion, similar to living in a monastery. During the Program, trainees live at the Center and participate in all aspects of traditional Zen training. A core element of the Training Program is learning how to bring Zen practice into everyday life.

The Training Program begins on **Sunday, July 21 at 9:00 a.m.** and ends on **Friday, July 26** after lunch. It's important to note that the Training Program begins **Sunday morning**. Local trainees can arrive at the Center in time for the morning sitting. Out-of-town trainees should arrive at the Center by Saturday evening.

More information at:

www.vermontzen.org/training_programs.html

Upcoming Courses at the Vermont Zen Center

www.vermontzen.org/courses.html

Haiku Poetry

Saturday, July 13

Through close readings of Japanese poets, participants learn the essential elements of traditional haiku and gain an understanding of the interaction between spiritual practice and poetry, as well as an appreciation of the deeper meaning of haiku. More information and registration on the Zen Center's website.

Weekend Indian Meal

Saturday, July 20

Learn how to prepare a delicious and authentic vegetarian Indian meal in the Vermont Zen Center's spacious kitchen. Manju Selinger will guide you through the process of preparing the meal, which all will enjoy for lunch. Limited enrollment. **Manju's courses fill quickly!** Register More information and registration on the Zen Center's website.

Intro to Zen

Saturday, August 10

During the half-day schedule of talks, question periods, demonstrations, and guided meditation, participants are introduced to the body-mind disciplines of Zen Buddhism. More information and registration on the Zen Center's website.



Water Baby Ceremony— Remembering Lost Children

For this ceremony we will gather in the dining room after the sitting. The ceremony itself takes place in the Jizo garden, weather permitting. Everyone is asked to bring some scraps of fabric (red, with or without pattern, is the traditional color, but you may bring other bright colors) as well as scissors, needle, and thread. The Center will provide these items for those who don't have them. In silence, working together, each of us will sew a small, simple garment such as an apron, cape, bib, or hat which will be placed on one of the many Jizo figures at the Center. The garment represents the being we are remembering, and thus commemorates a death and rebirth, a passing from one form of life to another. Those who wish may also write the name of the child or a verse on a piece of paper which will be placed between the rocks in the Jizo garden.

While we work in silence, anyone may speak about his or her experience of loss. When we have finished sewing, we will carry the figures to the Jizo garden where we will chant the Prajna Paramita, the Kannon Sutra, and the Sutra of Jizo Bodhisattva, followed by a special Eko to return the merit of the ceremony to the

children. Each person or couple will then offer incense and put their garments on a figure.

Participants are welcome to stay after the ceremony to talk or just sit quietly. This ceremony is not limited to members of our Center. However, everyone who comes should participate. While many people who attend do so to mourn for a personal loss, it is also appropriate to come if you wish to mourn for children not individually known to you—for example, children who have died from starvation or through violence. Such disasters touch us all, even if we have never met those who died. This is the only ceremony at the Center where we ask that you not bring young children. *Om Ka Ka Kabi Sam Ma E Sowa Ka* —

Ceremony Workday

Please come to the workday on **Saturday, August 24 at 9 AM** to help set up the dining room and prepare the Jizo garden for the Water Baby Ceremony on Sunday. The work period will last an hour or two depending on the number of people who can lend a hand. *Thank you!*

On Sunday, August 25, the Zen Center will hold a Water Baby Ceremony after a one hour sitting with a short talk.

The Water Baby Ceremony is a Buddhist service for adults who have lost an infant or young child through still birth or early death, have lost a fetus through miscarriage or abortion, or have lost a child of any age, in any way. It is also appropriate for people who wish to remember a child who has passed, even if it is not their own, to attend this ceremony.

Jizo Bodhisattva presides over the Water Baby Ceremony. He is considered to be the protector of women, children, travelers, the helpless, and the needy. In Japan, there are thousands of Water Baby shrines. Often many figures are placed together in a garden or on a mountainside.



Annual Yard Sale Saturday, August 17

Our **ANNUAL YARD, BAKE, & CRAFT Sale** will be on **Saturday, August 17**. Once again, we will have a **CRAFT SALE** running concurrently with the yard sale. Donations for the sale may be left in the basement common room anytime **after the August sesshin**. This is a wonderful fund-raiser for the Center, as well as a great way to clean out your unwanted, unused, and unneeded stuff.

Last year we had the sale outdoors—unlike the previous several years when it was inside the Center—and it was one of our most successful yard sales to date. This year we will make a decision as the date draws near. Vermont weather is hard to predict! —

Zen Center Summer Events

July

- 🍷 Sangha Picnic
- 🍷 Haiku Workshop
- 🍷 Teisho
- 🍷 Indian Cooking Course
- 🍷 Training Program
- 🍷 7-Day Sesshin begins



August

- 🍷 7-Day Sesshin continues
- 🍷 Workshop
- 🍷 Roshi Kapleau Teisho
- 🍷 Yard Sale Workdays
- 🍷 Yard Sale
- 🍷 Water Baby Ceremony




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The stillness; 
The voices of the cicadas
Penetrate the rocks.
-Basho

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If you have time over the next several months to help with mowing, weed whacking, or gardening, please contact Jhana, Jim, or Nowa.

Thank you for helping to keep our land beautiful and welcoming.